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Book Reviews

Alan Gillis, *Here Comes the Night*. Oldcastle: Gallery, 2010. 104 pages. GBP 10.50.

Here Comes the Night is Alan Gillis's third collection, and the first to mark Scotland, both literary and literal, as a presence in his work. Although many poems pointedly locate themselves within an Irish context, invoking, among others, Van Morrison, Sheridan Le Fanu and U2 (even 'Whiskey' goes the Irish way), his adopted city of Edinburgh makes repeated appearances. And, at a deeper level, so do the greats of Scottish literature. This is not to suggest we have 'lost Gillis to Scotland'; merely to note that there are new forces at play, and that many of them take their cue from tropes and ideas prominent in both recent and canonical Scottish writing.

Gillis has always been a poet with a pronounced and vocal social consciousness, a trait more common to Scottish poetry than to Irish. But it's psychologically that Scotland really makes its mark, and particularly in the concept of the double. Traceable through Don Paterson (of whom Gillis is a perceptive critic) back to writers like Stevenson and James Hogg, the double or alter-ego forms a rich seam in modern Scottish literature, challenging the rigidities of identity formation and the perceived barriers between, for example, reason and the irrational, progress and archaism. *Here Comes the Night* is a book haunted by doubles and doublings back. Many of the poems occupy liminal spaces (the beach, dawn, dusk) and take as their subject irresolvable paradoxes and unanswerable questions. 'Dream' meets 'real', substance shadow and form chaos, each proving tainted by and inextricable from the very other or opposite against which it hopes to self-define.

One of the most persuasive doublings exists in relation to definition itself, which throughout the book is associated with the impulse of art and is sought and shunned in equal measure. The sonnet 'Eloquence' courts linguistic perfection, the 'dead-eyed accuracy' of a metaphorical 'plunge' into 'the ice-shock deep' from which the poet would resurface 'with a glittered life writhing in the beak'. Likewise, 'Prelude' commences with the desire 'to reach within, / clear the clutter and discover / your exact life, the real thing'. However, the poem fails to deliver on its goal, instead taking the speaker on a surreal journey

through the mirror of dream or art (or both) which leads only to a frustrating urge to return to the start point. 'Something else' is discovered during its course, but it isn't perfection or the demonstrable 'real thing' that's wooed at the outset. Indeed, although phantasmagoric, the vision isn't even separated from the world of 'clutter' from which it's designed to escape. Rather, the speaker finds himself 'stranded / at a party where people wear Sarah Palin / plastic masks'; 'the violence within' mimics and warps 'the violence without' rather than offering desirable alternatives.

If this sounds complicated, that's because it is: Gillis's are difficult poems, and they inhabit territories of confusion and contradiction. The sonnet sequence is a form designed to argue with itself – across its range, ideas are endlessly tested, chewed over, rebutted and reworked (though rarely resolved). There are three sonnet sequences in *Here Comes the Night*, all broadly concerned with the notion of answering questions. In 'Approaching Your Two Thousand Three Hundred and Thirty-Third Night', Gillis attempts to satisfy his son on the subject of the purpose of life. In 'The Green Rose', a hen-pecked farmer joins up in the hope of *finding* purpose (instead he finds, first, Walt Whitman, who only confuses him further, and, second, death). And in 'In Whose Blent Air All Our Compulsions Meet' a troubled couple 'take the air' in the attempt to grasp their relation to one another, pin-point their exact place on the marital trajectory. Like many poems in the book, 'In Whose Blent Air' is both a failed 'quest' and an undecided tussle between the warring opposites of determinism and individual self-determination. Humans have many analogues in *Here Comes the Night* – army ants, rats and, in this case, wrens, which are alternately 'buffeted' by the whim of the wind and capable of 'breaking free', 'sweeping the breadth / and buffets of the sky' on their own terms. Characteristically, the poem doesn't decide which state is dominant, but weighs and worries at both. The fifth sonnet concludes, 'Sometimes it doesn't help knowing / there is more than one way of going'. However, it's precisely this crisis or schism that animates the book at large, and through which Gillis explores his ethics of and relationship with language, which (as it should be) is at the heart of everything he writes.

Language is a slippery medium in the fifth sonnet of 'In Whose Blent Air'. The traditional defining marks of Northern Irish culture – 'Vote for Sinn Féin', 'Fuck the Pope', 'God is good' – are warped and eroded so that they still make 'sense', but not the sense intended:

'Vote for Sin', 'Fuck the Pop', 'God is go'

Language, one might say, is less an unreliable guide, here, than a reliable guide to unreliability, but also something from which meaning

continues to be sought. Likewise, in 'Down Dark and Emptying Streets', questions receive answers, but answers to or statements on different questions:

she says Hey there,
in her clown voice, is that a spanner
in yer works? under the twenty-foot
high frown of an *Ulster Says No* banner

'Eloquence' goes further, positing a 'tax' on supposed linguistic purity through the image of a diving bird that enters an oil slick:

there'd be some dark slick of pitch to tax
such flight, and I'd splutter, coast-bound and waxed

The concepts of 'tax' and 'spluttering' suggest that (for poet if not bird) the punishment is self-imposed, and that 'gicked' is (again for poets, not for birds) a better state to be in in a world where eloquence is often culpable and should perhaps be literally charged. Gillis's attitude to music (and the music of metrical language) bears this out – despite the collection's title – as does his double appropriation and interrogation of Ian Paisley's speech on the opening of the Northern Irish Assembly in 2007. Paisley quoted from Ecclesiastes 3, 'A time to [black], a time to [white]'. 'If There was Time All Day to Wait' and 'Graduation Day' repeat the job, but, by re-contextualizing, invert the content with savage irony. In 'Graduation Day', 'a time to get and a time to lose, / a time to keep and a time to cast away' is addressed to 'those in closing down offices and dole queues / who watch these graduates stream into bars'. And in 'If There was Time All Day to Wait', an elegy, it's directed back on Paisley himself:

Someone should say to
the Big Man: 'Hallelujah. Amen, and about time
too. But what was wrong in '69 or '72?
Too bad for everyone who's had to
bear him out, too bad for – what did he call
them? – the honoured and unageing dead

Suddenly, it doesn't seem like calling time – or calling anything – should be so easy. 'Dead-eyed' accuracy gains its resonance at far too high a price; true accuracy (which has more to do with context and addressee than timeless rhetoric, and may not be so tidy) is a much more difficult game.